

## Just the Facts...

### Yellowjackets



Photo: Oregon State University

Most people know and fear the yellow and black striped yellowjacket wasps that are common, uninvited guests to late summer picnics. However, many people confuse honey bees, which are fuzzy and only feed on flower nectar, with yellowjackets, which have shiny bodies and feed on insects, nectar, sap, and sugary liquids. Yellowjackets are beneficial insects because they pollinate plants and capture insects and carrion (dead meat) to feed to their young.

Their ability to sting makes them a considerable health concern. Yellowjackets alone are responsible for about one-half of all human insect stings. The only purpose of the sting, which is a defense mechanism, is to inflict pain. Yellowjackets are easily provoked and will attack in force if their nest is disturbed. Unlike honey bees,

yellowjackets can sting more than once. However, unless a person is allergic to yellowjacket venom, stings are rarely life threatening. If symptoms are more serious than localized swelling, reddening and pain or mild headache and fever, a physician should be consulted. Multiple stings are especially dangerous. Some people may develop sensitivity to venom after repeated stinging episodes over a short or long period of time.

Yellowjackets are most frequently encountered when they scavenge for food and can be a nuisance because of their appetite for nectar and sugar. They frequent places where sweet food products are served such as picnic facilities, ice cream stands, soda fountains, or snowball stands. In the fall, these locations usually have extremely high yellowjacket populations because normal food supplies are scarce.

#### **You can avoid being stung by following a few rules:**

Avoid wearing perfumes, hair sprays, and cosmetics as yellowjackets are often attracted to these compounds.

Avoid brightly colored clothing such as red, light blue, yellow, and orange. Instead, wear light-colored clothing such as white and tans.

Remove all outdoor food sources attractive to wasps. Feed pets indoors and keep garbage cans tightly covered and wash cans regularly to remove spilled food. Bury fallen fruit and table scraps deep in compost piles and don't compost meat scraps or bones.

Watch where you sit or step (don't go barefoot!).

Remain calm in the presence of yellowjackets. If they are gently brushed off the body instead of being swatted, chances of being stung are considerably reduced. If a colony is disturbed, walk slowly away with both hands covering the face to protect the more sensitive body areas. It is best to walk toward dense vegetation or enter a vehicle or building to avoid the stinging insects. **Rapid movements will only attract more yellowjackets.**

#### **To reduce yellowjacket problems at picnics and barbecues:**

Minimize the length of time food is available by keeping it tightly covered until just before it is to be eaten. Clear away scraps and dirty plates as soon as the meal is over.

Serve sweet or alcoholic drinks in covered cups with drinking straws through the lids so wasps can't get inside and then sting you in the mouth as you drink. When drinking out of a can, use a straw or keep the opening covered with your thumb between sips.

Remove food waste frequently and maintain tight lids on all trash receptacles. Set up baited yellowjacket traps around the edge of the picnic area or on the end of the table to attract wasps away from the food and to capture them. Small disposable

cardboard traps or reusable ones made of wood and metal screen are sold at garden centers. They work by attracting wasps to bait placed under an inverted funnel. When the wasps have had their fill and instinctively fly upwards toward the light at the end of the funnel, they are trapped in an enclosed chamber above. One can buy any variety of ready-made traps with a wide range of effectiveness.

In early and midsummer, 1-2 traps should be enough for most picnics. In August and early September, however, 6 or more traps might be necessary. For much of the season, the best baits are ham, fish, cat food or meat scraps. Later in the summer, when wasps need less protein because they aren't rearing their young, sweet baits such as jam, honey or rotting fruit are often more attractive. Make very sure the yellowjackets are dead before cleaning out reusable traps.

### **Removing Yellowjacket Nests**

Although the number of yellowjackets in late summer invariably prompts many concerned inquiries on how to control them, usually there is little that can be done. Except for the queen, the whole colony will die in a matter of weeks as fall approaches. Even if a nearby nest is discovered late in the summer, eliminating it may not have the desired effect because wasps can fly in from up to a mile away. It is never advisable to put out poison baits because children and pets may get into them and because other, beneficial, insects may take the bait and be killed. If yellowjackets do build a nest in a location likely to cause problems with people or livestock, the best time to remove it is early in the season, while it is still small. It is best to have a professional pest control operator remove the nest. If you chose to remove the nest yourself, there are chemical wasp sprays available. Always use such products according to directions on the label. Remove an exposed nest that has been sprayed as soon as the wasps are dead. Wear rubber gloves and dispose of the nest to prevent birds from eating the poisoned larvae left inside.

### **Removing a Hanging Nest Without Using Chemicals**

First, it is a good idea to get a helper. To be safe, both of you should wear protective clothing from head to foot. Although a beekeeper's suit with hat and veil is ideal, you can assemble a similar suit for the occasion from heavy coveralls, a hat with a wide brim and a length of fine screening. Wear boots with your pants cuffs tucked inside the boot tops and seal the cuffs around the boot top with rubber bands or duct tape so that wasps can't get up your legs. Wear gloves and pull them up over your sleeve cuffs. Pull the screening over the hat (the brim should keep it away from your face) and tie it around the neck, over the collar of the coveralls. Make sure there are no openings around the collar or base of the veil. You should wear another layer of clothing underneath the overalls because yellowjacket stingers are long enough to reach through one layer of cloth. To remove the nest, approach in the evening or at night when the wasps are all home and less active because it is cool. Have your helper hold open a large, heavy bag or a box with a tight lid under the nest while you cut the attaching stem of the nest as quickly as possible using a long handled pruning hook, or other tool. When the nest is in the bag or box, close it immediately and seal shut. Kill the wasps inside by putting the whole package in a deep freeze for 24 hr. or by directing a wasp spray into the package for several minutes through a small hole in the package. Don't neglect this last step because yellowjackets can eventually chew their way out of almost anything.



Photo: Worsley School

### **Nests In Walls**

Never block up the opening as yellowjackets can chew through wood or follow wiring to the interior of the house. In the fall, when the nest is definitely vacant, caulk or repair the crack to prevent recolonization next year.

### **Underground Nests**

This is a job better left to a pest control operator, who can dig and vacuum out the nest; however, you can pour several gallons of boiling water into the nest. Wear protective clothing as described above and be extremely careful not to scald yourself with the boiling water.



Photo: Troy Bartlett